

## Class Mediation and Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South*

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Many readers have observed striking similarities between Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855). One typically finds references to Gaskell's inheritance from Austen in studies of Gaskell's novels. A. B. Hopkins, Gaskell's biographer, describes *North and South* as a "Victorian *Pride and Prejudice*" (139). Rosemarie Bodenheimer observes that *North and South* "reaches back to Jane Austen both for its depiction of strong-minded domestic virtue and for the social optimism of its *Pride and Prejudice* plot structure" (53). In *North and South*, W. A. Craik suggests, "the influence of the Jane Austen type of novel is clearly seen in its theme" (94). And Ann Banfield, an Austen scholar, argues that "Austen's pattern is reapplied most explicitly in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, which opens as an Austen novel" (44). In focusing on Gaskell's use of the Austen type of novel in *North and South*, these comments implicitly emphasize Gaskell's mixing of genres; in other words, Gaskell blends the Austenian novel of manners with her industrial or social problem novel. The industrial novel was a genre that arose in the 1840s and 1850s and, as its name implies, focuses on the working conditions and class conflicts associated with industrialization. As Deirdre David notes, the genre "quite nakedly sets out to resolve social conflict and to provide moral lessons" (x). But within Gaskell's story of class conflict appears a "romantic narrative of Northern mill-owner and Southern clergyman's daughter" who, like Elizabeth and Darcy, struggle with pride and prejudice and must be properly educated by one another during the course of the novel (David xi).<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, then, critical attention tends to focus on how Gaskell made use of her predecessor's pattern. In comparing *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South*, however, I would like to shift attention slightly to the way Austen's early-nineteenth-century novel looks *ahead* to

some of the class issues that came to the fore in Gaskell's midcentury novel. In many ways, Austen's "provincial, rural England, apparently untouched by the industrial revolution" (Irvine 9) has little connection to Gaskell's industrialized England, where power no longer resides with the gentry but with the rising middle class. Yet both authors attempt to bring about class cooperation in similar ways. Drawing on Nancy Armstrong's influential account of the middle-class domestic woman's ability to unify "competing ideologies" (5), I will argue that Austen and Gaskell facilitate personal contact between the classes through the mediation and, finally, marriage of their respective heroines, Elizabeth Bennet and Margaret Hale. In surveying the scholarly debates surrounding Austen and Gaskell's use of marriage as a metaphor for class cooperation, I will show that while scholars tend to agree on the plausibility of the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy, they are more likely to fault Gaskell's use of the marriage plot on the grounds that it evades the novel's complicated class issues. Such a discrepancy highlights the relationship between genre and reader expectations, suggesting that readers are more willing to accept a fairy-tale romance plot in a novel of manners than in an industrial novel.

Armstrong's feminist history of the novel, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, enables us to understand why Austen and Gaskell's heroines are so adept at mediating between the classes. Armstrong argues that the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century rested on a struggle to say what made a woman desirable, and that this desirability was increasingly defined not in terms of the aristocratic ideals of birth and status but in terms of gender (4-5). Domestic fiction was thus instrumental in propagating a female subject understood in psychological rather than political terms. As Armstrong notes, by "representing life with such a woman as not only desirable but also available to virtually anyone, this ideal eventually reached beyond the beliefs of region, faction, and religious sect to unify the interests of those groups who were neither extremely powerful nor very poor" (3). Thus novels were able to bring order to social relationships by subordinating social differences to